

**Bottom of the Bottle**  
**by Ubersalamander**

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They'd found him dancing in the rain: twirling, stomping, slurring a song with all his voice, bowing to the statue in the center of the park. When the stone man didn't appreciate his performance enough, he'd shouted, and had tried to pull that overwrought chunk of marble from its high-and-mighty pedestal.

They'd pulled him from the puddle he'd landed in. They'd shouted words like "Take it easy," and "How much have you had to drink tonight, sir?" The words had made his blood boil. They were grabbing him, and that pompous man of stone had still gloated from on high. He'd curled his hand into a fist. He'd wanted to strike them, but before he could wrench his arms from their steely grasps, a wave of cold had washed between his face and skull. His saliva had changed its taste. His jaw had lolled open all on its own, as if supported by strings instead of muscles.

Not even those iron-like grips could keep him upright as he'd spewed a slurry of Whopper, fries, and various alcohols all over his own shoes. Fortunately, by the time they'd cuffed him and tossed him in the car, the rain had washed most of it off.

His head rang as if a pair of giants were taking turns at it with hammers. His tongue felt drier than the concrete floor. Something reeked of vomit.

He was alone, he thought. There were no cellmates, no rats, no flies, and no roaches. There were no statues either; he couldn't remember, but he assumed that pompous bastard was still in the park. Probably still gloating, too — everyone felt superior to a sloppy drunk, even if they were dead.

"Sneer while you can, stone man. Just wait until I get some spray paint."

"Awake already? Welcome back to the drunk tank, Wexley."

"Shut up." Of course that pig was here, too.

"Come on, Wex. We should be friends by now! Talk nice."

"Shut up — Please!"

The officer tutted, and Wexley heard the metallic squeal that meant the rotund policeman had twisted his chair toward him. "I heard you were putting on quite the show out there. Those two rooks wanted to throw every charge on the sheet at you! The chief talked 'em down, though, bless his kind old heart. How many times has he saved your bacon now?"

"Please, shut up," Wexley whined.

The officer condescended him enough to chuckle, and then the chair squealed back toward whatever droning nonsense was playing on the little TV tonight. "Rest up, Wexley. I'll let you out after you've slept some more. Just thank your lucky sta — !"

Stars? Was Paulson really so lazy now that he couldn't even finish his sentences? Stars... maybe tomorrow he'll paint some stars on the statue. That'd teach that uptight dead prick; not everyone was born an outstanding citizen like him. What did he even do? Chase away the redskins? Found this godforsaken town? Please. Wexley could've done that, had he been born back then. Would've done it better, too. Then he'd be the asshole with an asshole statue in some asshole town named after his shitty asshole. But instead, he was in the here-and-now, and you can't just go around plopping towns on native lands in the here-and-now — not as a civilian, anyway.

But, you could still be a wretch. It wasn't easy, but if anyone could be a bitter, resentful, drunk, it was Albert Wexley. He didn't even charge anyone for it; just tell a friendly doctor that you have back pain enough times, and the government will send you a check in the mail every month. It reminded him of that commercial. What was it? 877-CASHOUT or something. He couldn't properly remember, but he'd catch it from Paulson's TV; the commercial played a lot on that shitty channel the pig liked. What the fuck even was an annuity? He listened.

There was nothing. No sound from the TV; no jingles, no COPS theme, no Arby's man screaming about meat, and definitely no annuities, whatever the fuck they were. There was no leaky faucet in the other cell, and Paulson's beleaguered breathing had stopped seeping up through his fat neck. Not even the air conditioning was running. It was eerie, as though the jail had become some ancient, undiscovered tomb.

Wexley's eyelids slid apart. He'd expected to see absolute darkness, thinking the power had been cut, but no — there was light. Plenty of it, too; there were the other cells, still empty. There was the oaf Paulson, his uniform and protective vest straining against his pudge, eyes glued to that little box of a TV sitting on his desk, and a french fry hanging out of his mouth. The TV was on, but nothing was playing. It was stopped: paused right in the middle of a Kleenex commercial.

"Paulson?"

The policeman didn't turn. He didn't say anything, and his eyebrows didn't so much as twitch in recognition. He merely sat staring, his unblinking eyes bathed in the glow of some bint paused in the act of blowing her nose. The fry sat unmoving in his mouth, and his immobile hand hovered an inch away.

"Officer Paulson?"

No response.

"Whatever, you fat fuck."

Still, no response. Damn... that usually got him.

Wexley lifted his torso from the bench he'd been laid upon. His body protested and his brain stabbed at him in revolt, but he powered through it. This was important — this was creepy. He glanced around until his vision brushed over the leaky faucet in the other cell.

He gasped with all the manliness of a pig-tailed little girl.

Below the spigot, above the basin, a droplet of water was held in midair. It was not suspended, nor was it even frozen as ice. It simply floated, fully formed but immobile, hovering as if in a photograph. He struggled to comprehend the impossible.

"Albert Wexley," said a voice, deepened not through pitch, but by gravitas. His eyes flicked back toward the desk. To his utmost surprise, a woman was standing just on the other side of the bars to his cell. She had not been there before, and yet, now she was, completely obscuring the police officer and his dinky little TV. She was tall, thin, pale, and with stark white hair that appeared like a nun's habit as it flowed over the shoulders of her pitch-black robes. He could not tell her age; she seemed at once as young as the present and as old as the beginning of time itself. Her eyes glowed with an icy blue that pierced Albert like an icicle stabbed into his soul.

His mouth formed his customary response to such a question. They did it all on their own, as if those specific words had been bred into them by a million years of evolution; they may as well have been for all the times he'd said them. Unfortunately, his mind didn't know what words he'd said until after they'd already left him, and by then it was too late for regret.

"Who the hell wants to know?"

The woman seemed none-too-impressed. Fortunately, she didn't seem particularly annoyed either, but it was hard to tell through the perpetual sneer of disdain she already wore.

"You may call me, 'The Judge,'" she said.

If anyone else at any other time had said that to him, he would've replied, "What, like fuckin' Judy?" But something about her authoritative posture, and the glowing eyes, and the frozen water drop kept that phrase from even entering his thoughts. What did come out of him was little more than a whimper.

"What do you want?"

"My watchers brought your case before me, and I took a personal interest in you. I have come to..." She paused, as if searching for the right turn of phrase. "Correct your path."

“What do you mean?”

“You are, quite frankly, a nasty man, Mr. Wexley. You know it, and yet you wallow in self-pity instead of doing anything to help yourself. You live at the generosity of others, and yet you despise them. You blame the world for your own failures. It is very unbecoming, especially of someone still so young. Do you really intend to keep this up for another 50 years? Or are you thinking alcoholism or suicide would do you in early?”

She stepped forward. Her body melted through the cell bars as if they were made of nothing but smoke. “You know you have potential, and yet, here you are: in jail... wasting it. You are a vile, hateful, toad, Mr. Wexley. I have come to steer you right. I will put you low, even lower than you are now. I will put your life in another’s hands, more so than you already do. There will be strife; there will be danger. But, you will learn to value the gift you are only given once, and in doing so, may help another on the same path.”

Soft, soundless, ethereal footsteps brought her to him. He looked up, unable to turn away from those terrible glowing eyes so deep as to be depthless.

“This is not a punishment,” she whispered. “It is opportunity.”

Her fingertips graced his shoulder with the ice of an endless winter and a thunderbolt that tore straight into his heart.

He blinked. The glowing eyes burned like comets in the heavens.

And then, he was somewhere else.

That smell.

Oh, that smell.

That was a smell that he knew well.

It was the succulent, tempting, nauseating, god-awful smell of the shittiest bottom-shelf vodka a few bucks could buy. He smiled. He shuddered. He heaved. He recoiled, but there was no escaping it. The stench was all around him. Wexley wrenched open his eyes to the stinging atmosphere — what he saw made no sense.

He was inside the bottle; not in some euphemistic expression of a way, but literally, physically, actually. The label surrounded him, wrapped around the thin plastic. It was in Russian, so the words were beyond him, but he knew from prior exposure that he was seeing their fucked-up runes from behind. His feet, now bare for some reason, splashed through alcohol as he ventured to the bottle wall. Was this an illusion? A dream? Was he drunk? He didn’t feel drunk. He didn’t feel like he was in a dream, either. But, gazing under the label and through the clear plastic, he thought he surely must’ve been.

He was in the bottle, and the bottle was in a room. Shocking.

Even more shocking; the room was not his. He’d never seen it before, and yet it was so familiar in size and cleanliness that it may as well have been his own rundown flat in the brown-bag side of town. There was a small kitchen at the far end, the counter covered in pizza boxes, fast food boxes, and other liquor bottles so numerous that the trash can couldn’t hold them all, even if it wasn’t already overflowing. Closer to him, an old TV played some kind of reality show where two overly-plastic Californian women were bitching at each other; the usual midday drivel. A gaming console was on the shelf beneath it, accompanied by a squad of dead soldiers of cheap beer and dusty figurines of colorful cartoon girls. Dirty laundry littered the floor; stained t-shirts, darkened socks, faded shorts... worn panties and frayed bras. So, there was a woman somewhere. That was a surprise.

He found her soon enough. The futon behind him creaked, and what he’d thought were just a pile of holey blankets were, in fact, a person. She looked young, but clearly old enough to have used her own ID to purchase the alcohol. Her hair was short and dark, mostly — the black dye job had begun to fade back to the brown it once had been. The style was presently indeterminate, though it

seemed to be some exquisite blend of “feral cat” and “disheveled ushanka.” The yawn that emanated from her was closer to a groan of pain, and her hand fumbled toward her forehead.

“Fuck,” she grumbled. The blankets peeled away, and the woman rolled off of the miserable whining futon. A long gray t-shirt covered much of her body, but not enough; if Wexley was a better man, he’d have turned away to respect her privacy. Instead, he stared hungrily as her tits quaked beneath a scratched and faded band logo, unburdened by a bra, nipples beaming like headlights. Her ass cheeks peeked from beneath the hem, quivering as she stumbled. It was only when she disappeared through the only interior doorway that he regained his senses.

She was big. Or rather, he was small. His mind accepted that fact surprisingly well; he should be refusing the evidence, curling into a fetal ball on the bottom of the bottle, questioning his failing sanity, or even just still believing it was all a damn dream. But, no — none of that. That weird bitch in the cell had done this, he knew, and there was simply no point in further disbelief. What he saw was his reality, no matter how fucking insane it was. Now, it was his old life that felt like an illusion, distant, as if decades had passed in a single night.

A toilet flushed, and the woman came stumbling back out. Her eyes were still groggy, but she’d used her fingers to comb her hair into something reminiscent of a bob cut. Those same giant fingers wrapped around the bottle, and she lifted it to her face to inspect the damage she’d done the prior night. Her eyelids squinted as a sliver of crack-of-noon sunlight poked through a rip in the blinds and caught the plastic. She had a gentle chin and a delicate nose, but the lines and shadows around her eyes were similar to the ones Wexley habitually wore.

“Maybe a few drops,” she whispered, and the man in the bottle found himself falling.

The cheap plastic may as well have been glass, as far as he was concerned. His shoulders and hips slammed painfully into the top — now bottom — of the bottle. His muscles burned with the effort of keeping his body from falling down the neck. Drops of vodka splashed onto him from above, confounding any attempt to find a better purchase with his arms and legs. Not one bit of the liquid found their way to the woman’s waiting mouth below.

So, of course, she shook the bottle.

“Stop, you stupid cunt bitch!” Wexley cried, as again and again, inertia and gravity slammed him into plastic.

“Huh?”

The motion stopped, and the slope lessened until could sit in the entrance to the neck. His muscles sighed in relief; maybe he wouldn’t have to keep lying to the doctor. That was, of course, assuming...

He looked over his shoulder to see a giant brown eye peering back at him in confusion.

“Oh,” she said. The bottle tilted suddenly, and Wexley was falling again. The plastic neck forced his body to invent a new yoga-position that would someday come to be known as the “drunken stapler.”

He landed on her skin in a liquor-soaked heap. Tree-trunk fingers surrounded him, and above, her moon-like face looked down at his aching nude form.

“Fuck you,” he whispered into her palm with vitriol he’d previously reserved for the statue in the park.

Foul, hot, cloying morning breath washed over him as she spoke, her voice still raspy and grating with sleep and liquor.

“You must be my new pet.”

In the background, the TV sang about annuities.